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ACADEMY OF  
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# Disciplined Provocation: Writing Essays for AMLE

The AMLE Editorial Team

Our aim in this Editorial is to provide our readers, potential authors and reviewers with clarification on the essays section of the journal. We believe that essays make a significant contribution to the advancement of scholarship in management learning and education, but in a different way to empirical papers. We want to encourage the submission of essays by elaborating on what we think is distinctive, interesting and important about this form of writing.

An AMLE essay offers potential authors the freedom to be opinionated; to exercise *disciplined provocation* in communicating their views of important management learning and education issues. This phrase pays homage to two enduring ideas. The first is Karl Weick's (1989) notion of 'disciplined imagination' in theory construction. The second is Hugh Willmott's (1994) 'provocations to a debate', which was one of the earliest and most influential papers of Critical Management Education. *Disciplined provocation* provides a succinct summary of what AMLE essays are about. The phrase captures the combination of theory and personal opinion that we are looking for. We can develop this by explaining some important features of the essays we want to publish.

There are four key characteristics of an AMLE essay. First, it is a composition based on the in-depth development of one specific idea or theme. Second, it reflects the authors' personal opinions on a subject of interest to AMLE readers. Third, it is effectively aligned with theory to provide the reader with a strong and convincing argument. Finally, it issues a call for action. Authors who apply disciplined provocation take an opinionated stance, but one where even the reader who disagrees can feel enthused to be part of a debate. Authors are able to connect with different views and show how and why new ideas can both sit alongside and critique existing ones. An AMLE essay is an expression of the passion of the writer, but equally a communication of the willingness to connect with a broad range of readers.

In an AMLE essay it is important to ensure that the authors' theoretical framing is clear and well-connected to existing AMLE debates, as well as offering a distinctive theoretical take on an issue within management learning and education. This can include connecting relevant theory from other disciplines to existing AMLE debates, or the problematization of established debates through the application of alternative theoretical or philosophical frameworks. There are many possibilities; but clarity with the framing should enable authors to arrive at a call for action through the lens of theory, rather than in a descriptive or technique-focused way. This is an important element of the AMLE approach as a theory-driven journal.

There are a number of devices that can be used in shaping and communicating a well-focused idea with relevance to management learning and education. For example, authors could create an expository essay, a comprehensive description and explanation of an idea. The idea might be presented to the reader and succinctly developed through examples, comparisons, and contrast. Good exposition offers clarity and insight. Authors can submit a polemical essay. This is a well-focused but nonetheless opinionated attack on a specific theme. It seeks to critique and unsettle established views or practices, as well as carefully developing an alternative vision. Well-crafted polemic is challenging and inspiring. Authors could present

us with a narrative essay, which makes a strong point by giving the reader a compelling story of management learning and education. A good story is a delight because it touches our experience and our emotions. Lastly, authors could present a theoretical essay. These essays build upon key theoretical ideas and constructs as a way to question existing conceptions of management learning and education. They provide insight because they offer a new theoretical lens onto an existing, and often taken-for-granted, way of thinking.

All of these approaches share a clear and open writing style and the focused development of a compelling idea that will be of interest to AMLE readers. We can provide a few examples to further illustrate what we are hoping for from submissions to this section of the journal.

### Examples

We have chosen a short and varied selection of AMLE essays to illustrate and discuss our points. However, these are not representations of established types that require imitation or conformity, nor are they the only examples we could use to illustrate the quality, passion and creativity of expression that characterises our tradition of publishing essays on interesting ideas and themes in management learning and education.

#### *Expository*

In his essay on why business schools should address poverty, and how they can go about it, Neal (2017) argues that management education can be a key player in sustaining or reducing poverty 'because it involves developing those whose careers and decisions directly impact on the fortunes of the world's poorest people' (p 55). The idea that is being developed here is a key moral issue for management education, that we can't continue to treat global capitalism and its dysfunctions as inevitable; nor can we teach sustainability without addressing deprivation. 'The issues surrounding deprivation should be brought from the outer reaches of management learning and education into its core: not as mere subcomponents of sustainability or business ethics, but as some of the most pressing management issues of our time' (Neal, 2017 p 56). There are strong and well-crafted arguments in this essay that lead logically towards clear practical implications. The author describes how to introduce four dimensions of poverty reduction to the classroom that illuminate key relationships between business and poverty (the role of big business in poverty reduction/ exacerbation; viewing the poor as markets; lending to the poor; the role of entrepreneurship in poverty reduction). Each dimension is further illuminated by an example case and instructional suggestions. The call for action is for us to stop marginalising issues of poverty and deprivation and instead focus on improving students' understanding through real examples of poverty as an integral feature of our economic and environmental systems.

#### *Polemic*

Morrell and Learmonth (2015) provide the AMLE reader with a polemical essay that is 'against evidence-based management' and 'for management learning'. This is an excellent example of disciplined provocation. It is a careful and cogent critique not only of the 'movement' of evidence-based management, but also of the special issue of AMLE that focused on it. Such reflexive questioning of the ideas we champion in this journal and our willingness to mobilise critiques of valued assumptions is, in part, what puts the 'learning' into management learning and education. This critique is overtly a combination of personal opinions 'against' evidence-based management. The central argument is therefore not only a

critique of evidence, but also a representation of a broader, more flexible conceptualisation of evidence. The authors argue that problems in management can always be understood in different ways and from different perspectives. To understand politics, power, and ethics, rather than beginning with a search for best available evidence requires ‘more fundamental questions’ and more precise ‘framing of the situation’. When an idea is so popular in business and management schools, it is rewarding to read such a well thought-through critique of it.

*Narrative*

Mitchell (2007) presents a more personalised narrative. He reflects on ‘over 30 years’ of teaching PhD students in a Business School and what can be drawn from this experience for the future. His premise is that: ‘Business Schools of the future are going to be different than they are today’ (p 248). He explores ‘the academic life’ as historical reflexivity from his own experience in context, and he addresses a ‘glaringly underrepresented’ discussion ‘of our PhD programs and the socialisation, education and training of our future faculty members’ (p 236). The focus of the essay is on what PhD students need to know that will help them to succeed in the business school of the future; as well as the consequent changes required in the ways in which faculty treat PhD students and structure PhD programs. The argument in this essay is direct and heartfelt. The author contends that ‘very little of our formal classroom instruction prepares us for *how* we become good teachers, researchers, and institutional citizens’ (p 239). He explores what it means to be ‘a good citizen’ in a business school. This is an impossible question to answer given the messy political environment we work in, but non-the-less an important question to continue to ask both in order to articulate what it might be in a given context, and in relation to critiquing such notions. The author’s call to action focuses on ‘three broad strategies... personal, educational and social’. Business Schools are going to be different *and*, in many ways, it is likely that they will remain the same. This tension will continue; and will continue to inform debates in AMLE.

*Theoretical*

Hibbert, Beech and Siedlok (2017) present the reader with a compelling notion, that it is possible to ‘look at leadership development differently’ (p 603). Of course, the art then is to deliver on such a promise. The authors do this by introducing a distinctive perspective on ‘leadership formation’, as well as outlining both ‘practical implications for educational policy’ and ‘theoretical implications for leadership development debates’. They explore the potential of philosophical hermeneutics (‘a theoretical framework that helps to explain how experience, interpretation, and dialogue are involved in individual formation’) to challenge established thinking about leadership development. They consider the implications of their theoretical framing both for the practice of and theoretical debates in leadership development. This is a thought-provoking essay. It invites the reader to think about what we know and feel about both leadership teaching and leadership practice. For example, there are strong associations here with views of leadership which recognise that it is as much about interpretation as it is about influence. In rethinking practice, the essay makes comparisons between three different areas (experience of interpretation, dialogue, and interpretation of experience); outlines what existing leadership development literature says about them; and considers the insights that can be gleaned from philosophical hermeneutics. New ideas are positioned elegantly within existing theories and their call for action is based on ‘an ambitious social and educational manifesto’ and on adding ‘nuance to debates on the focus of development’.

Pulling these examples together we can offer the following considerations. Disciplined provocations can come in many different forms. However, they all carefully develop one key idea. They are opinionated, but in ways that can connect with and stimulate a broad range of AMLE readers. The arguments presented in AMLE essays have a strong and clear alignment with theory, and they offer the reader a coherent and practical call for action.

### **Writing and refining an AMLE essay**

We think it is important to add a reflection on how they are developed, alongside an understanding of the shape and content of AMLE essays. While the provocative content and much of the discipline of an essay has to come from the author, some part of the discipline is also informed by the editorial and review processes.

The essay co-editors often receive inquiries, based on reasonably well-developed ideas, about potential AMLE essays. We encourage these exploratory inquiries, to help authors develop their work in the right way for AMLE – or acknowledge that a different destination would be a better fit. For example, provocative positions can initially be ‘views from the edge’, and the connection with AMLE debates needs to be worked out. And sometimes, especially in the case of narrative essays which can be personal and heartfelt, the author needs guidance on whether a peer-reviewed format such as an AMLE essay is right for them.

When an essay is potentially a good fit with AMLE, authors can expect the discipline of their provocation to be established in dialogue with constructively critical peer reviewers. They can expect these developmental dialogues to be robust. If authors take a provocative position, a strong reaction is likely (indeed, it is desirable) and they should expect to have to defend – and most likely refine – their position and contribution. AMLE always seeks to offer advice that can help authors to refine their ideas. But no AMLE submission is without risk, and sometimes it becomes clear that an essay is not a good fit as the review process proceeds. However, a conversation with reviewers that is challenging can be a positive sign, as it can prefigure similar kinds of engagement with the readers of AMLE.

Overall, it is important to hear the author’s voice in an essay, but the author’s expression needs to be situated in a conversation with other voices in AMLE debates, and to make a difference to those debates. It is this balance that we seek to support through the editorial and review processes for essays, leading to the expression of new ideas that can make a potential difference to theory and practice.

### **What an AMLE essay is not**

There are common problems that we encounter in submissions to the essays section of AMLE. For example, the main idea of the essay is not fully or clearly explained, or it is beset with diversions, or with unnecessary complications of language or thought. It is important that authors keep things simple and follow their specific idea through from beginning to end. We have noticed that overly complex writing undermines the clarity of an argument. We recommend the removal of unnecessary clauses and seemingly endless sentences in the service of simple, clear expression. Theoretical tangents, diversions from the main idea, and explanatory footnotes do not support the flow of an essay. Keeping things clear and direct makes an AMLE essay accessible to a broad readership. We have found that isolated or under-developed assertions easily undermine the flow of an argument.



There can be a fine line between critiquing established ways of thinking and dismissing them. Our view is that provocations to think differently do not scorn established notions, but rather build an accessible critique to offer something new and interesting. We often read submissions that are weak or under-developed theoretically, that neglect existing theoretical insights, or that are overly focused on one perspective to the exclusion of other important knowledge. AMLE is an international journal and we find sometimes that issues of potential interest to all our readers are only developed in relation to management learning and education in one or other part of the world. Of course, the problems we have mentioned here are not the only things that undermine effective essay writing, but this brief list should provide the reader with some clues as to what an AMLE essay is not.

**Some concluding thoughts**

In his reflections on the essay as an ‘endangered species’, Gabriel (2016) suggests that the key questions addressed by an essay include: why, so what, and (‘maybe above all’) what if?

‘The essay gives a voice to an author’s creative imagination, enabling him or her to critique assumptions that are rarely questioned and explore new possibilities for intellectual and social change’ (Gabriel, 2016 p. 244).

He sees the essay as a dual intervention against a status quo, one that both challenges established ways of thinking and the political interests supported by these ways of thinking. (Morrell and Learmonth, 2015 is an excellent example of such a dual intervention). He warns against ‘boring the reader’, being ‘navel-gazingly narcissistic, cliché-ridden, incoherent, politically ultra-correct, pompous, pretentious, timid or simply full of hot air’ (p 249). This is good advice.

As an Editorial Team we want to support the AMLE essay as a form of scholarly writing that allows authors to be opinionated and provocative; that encourages debates between different views and approaches to important themes in management learning and education; and that stimulates ‘creative imagination’ (Gabriel, 2016) as much as scholarly rigour. We want to see more ‘disciplined provocations’ submitted to AMLE and we look forward to the new ideas and continuing debates that this form of academic writing can provide.

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